

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Education Policy: Bridging the divide between theory and practice (2nd Edition)

by Jerome G. Delaney

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Increasingly, there is a tendency to turn to educators to provide a panacea for the social, moral, political, and economic problems plaguing our society. Delaney offers a systematic and straightforward approach to examining education policy, what it means, and how it is developed, implemented, evaluated, and disseminated. He acknowledges that while his approach to writing about education policy has been quite linear, the work of implementing education policy is somewhat less than linear. In fact, it is a circuitous and challenging undertaking, for teachers, building administrators, and school board officials alike, made all the more difficult by the relationship of policy to power and control.

Prior to becoming an academic, Delaney was a teacher and principal in Newfoundland and Labrador's K-12 public school system. Through this lens, he is able to address some of the underlying assumptions of policy implementation. Admittedly, some of these assumptions may be common knowledge to those outside of the domain of public education, such as the fact that educational institutions tend to be tradition-bound and resistant to change. However, other of Delaney's assertions reveal an insider perspective, such as his firsthand understanding that many policies are met with skepticism by

classroom teachers, who as professionals are prone to reflecting critically on new policy, that is often formed or at least authorized by lay boards.

Education Policy: Bridging the Divide Between Theory and Practice is divided into fifteen chapters and allows a clear framework to ease the transition from idea to implementation. From the first chapter, “An Overview of Education Policy,” in which Delaney demonstrates that “There are as many definitions of education policy as there are writers on the subject” (p. 3) to the final chapter, in which he endorses educational policy as a way to improve teaching and learning, this book guides the reader through a systematic approach to mastering what policy means, and why it is beneficial. Furthermore, Delaney examines the role of research, and the challenges that surround its implementation, evaluation, and dissemination. He delineates practical examples, tips, and guidelines for approaching the topic, and clearly enumerates many of its primary points. Each section provides a focused framework, using headings and subheadings, often written in list format. Finally, each chapter culminates with a set of relevant discussion and reflection questions, designed to unpack the terminology and to provoke further explorations into practical applications.

In the opening chapter, the author enumerates the benefits of “well-written, well-organized, and regularly updated policies” (p. 5). Chapters 2 and 3 examine values and principles as well as types of education policies, respectively. In Chapters 4 to 9, Delaney delves into policy analysis, development, implementation, evaluation, dissemination, and regulations in succession. Chapters 10 to 15 signal a departure from an attempt to define, and probe more deeply into the complexities that accompany the implementation of policy in education. Subsequently, the book closes with a chapter entitled “Concluding Thoughts.” Here, Delaney underscores the divide between the “real-life intricacies and complexities” (p.98) of education policy and the “linear approach” (p.98) best suited to writing a book or giving a lecture on the subject.

This book presents a clear and comprehensive overview of policy for academics, administrators, teachers, and students. Undoubtedly, it would lend itself especially well to collaborative study in education classrooms where groups of students could summarize and critique a chapter and then present their findings to the class. Delaney takes a step-by-step approach, and aims to “guide and facilitate our work as educators, whether we are teachers in the classroom, building administrators, or school board officials” (p. 100).

Ideally, supplementing this book with readings of direct case studies from Delaney's own experience as an educator and administrator may provide a more realistic understanding of what it means to bring policy to fruition amid the politics of education. Although the book takes a practical approach to deconstructing the discourse surrounding policy, this is unlikely to guarantee an easy execution of policy implementation, since, as they say, "the devil is in the details." Those who try will have their work cut out for them, as they navigate the transition from the theoretical to the practical.

One of Delaney's end-of-chapter questions asks about the approach one might take if designing a graduate course on educational policy studies. This book would be an excellent starting place for an educator hoping to design such a course. The author himself acknowledges that his approach to educational policy has been "somewhat linear" (p. 98), whereas the real-life context of education policy is "anything but linear" (p. 98). However, this is perhaps an inherent challenge of the social scientist, to navigate the complex emotional and political waters of the social, while still managing to classify ways of knowing. Ultimately, the goal of researching, drafting, and implementing effective educational policies is to afford a richer learning context for the student. For this, Jerome G. Delaney's guide can be relied upon to provide a wealth of relevant, lived experiences. He takes a multi-faceted construct, removes the ambiguity, and sets his sights on creating a succinct and systematic definition in order to impose uniformity and utility on the field of education policy.